

social arrangements that give not the merely formal but the conscious consent of citizens to what is being done in their name by their representatives

Actually nearly thirty years of work were to lie behind them before their sociological studies assumed a directly political reference, although, during the whole time, they were concerned with the working out of democratic institutions. Instead, they were predominantly concerned with those voluntary associations of consumers and producers whose part in the life of the State was already important, and destined to become even more so, the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Societies, and with the activity—or inactivity—of the citizen in regard not to the governance of the nation as a whole, but to those intimate aspects of daily life which are controlled by local institutions. They in fact filled in the thick background of the world as it is, before they attempted to build it up as it might become.

From this point of view, as well as from the other standpoint that interested them—that of practical sociology—

very great significance attaches to the enormous enterprise on which they were constantly engaged, although with serious and important interruptions, from 1898 to 1929.

This is *The History of Local Government in England* which,

when completed, fills ten stout tomes. Here, they were pioneers, in more senses than one. In recognising what he called "local collective activity" as a "notable element"

in that { ever growing elaboration of organised
common
action" which is " the dominant characteristic
of the social
movements of the past three quarters of a
century,"¹
Sidney Webb, even in 1909, when he wrote
these words,
was not pointing out something that
everyone already
knew Far from that To-day, it is true,
everybody accepts
the view—although sometimes with a groan—
that " local
government matters " But it was not so, when
the Webbs

¹ *Towards Social Democracy* ^p (Cambridge Modern
History, 1909)